

Residents group asks theater to earn new offices

County Council to discuss Round House Theatre's lease for civic building space Tuesday

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A Silver Spring residents group is asking the Round House Theatre to offer more community events and more transparency in their business plan as the performance group prepares to occupy a significant portion of the new Silver Spring Civic Building free of charge.

When the new civic building opens July 8, 22 employees of Round House Theatre, a nonprofit performance-arts group with theaters in Silver Spring and Bethesda, will occupy about 25 percent of the building's 42,000 square feet. Round House will not pay rent at the space, an agreement reached with former Montgomery County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D) in exchange for Round House providing arts-education services and performances in Silver Spring, a state-designated arts and entertainment district.

At 2:30 p.m. Tuesday, the Montgomery County Council's Health and Human Services and Planning, Housing and Economic Development subcommittees will hold a joint work session to examine that agreement and determine the terms of Round House's lease with the county.

In advance of that meeting, the Silver Spring Citizens Advisory Board sent a letter to County Executive Isiah Leggett (D) and the council with a list of suggestions as to how Round House can properly fulfill its end of the agreement.

"Although we applaud county support for [Round House Theatre], we seek assurance that promises to the community will also be honored," the letter said.

In the letter, the board asks that Round House hold one rehearsal per performance open to the public, three free outdoor performances on the upcoming Veterans Plaza and five free community workshops per year. The board also asks that Round House's lease be limited to five years with the possibility of renewal if Round House meets the community's demands. Round House should also provide its business plan, marketing budget and a semi-annual report on its outreach efforts, the board asked.

"We want something specific," Deborah Linn, an advisory board member, said at the board's monthly meeting Monday. "If nothing requires them specifically to do anything, the county will never be able to terminate the contract."

"We need something measurable," said board member Tiffany Graham-Golden.

Regarding the board's demands, Round House artistic director Blake Robison said the organization already offers many free community events and submits its business plans to the county council, which is public record.

"We're all about transparency," Robison said by phone Tuesday from Utah where he is a guest director at the Utah Shakespearean Festival. "We have no problem with that."

Round House currently has offices and a theater in Bethesda and Silver Spring, an educational center also in Silver Spring and will use offices and rehearsal space in the civic building, all on leases with the county for no rent. Most arts organizations in the county operate under a similar agreement because of the services they provide to the community.

But amid recent budget cuts, Round House has had to cut staff and cast and rarely puts on its own performances in its Silver Spring theater on Colesville Road. As a result, the advisory board has questioned whether Round House deserves its civic building office space over other community groups, especially given the value of the space it occupies.

According to Round House statistics submitted to the advisory board, in fiscal year 2009 Round House's occupation of its Bethesda theater was worth an estimated \$942,000; for its Silver Spring theater the space is valued at \$429,000; space that the educational center occupies in the Wayne Avenue parking garage is valued at \$175,000. In other words, the county could earn about \$1.5 million if it rented those buildings out to paying organizations.

Round House has put about \$150,000 into a fund that pays for building improvements at its Bethesda theater, as part of an agreement it signed with the county in 2001. For its Silver Spring theater and educational center, Round House would pay 25 percent of its revenue surplus if it were to prove its operations were self-sustaining. Robison said the entire organization has a balanced budget this year.

"That's a notable thing," he said. "There are many other organizations that are struggling with massive debts and we don't have that."

The advisory board expects the value of the civic building space to reach nearly \$1 million.

"The county is giving a gift to Round House as opposed to an agreement," said Richard Ripley, an advisory board member.

At 2:30 p.m. Tuesday, the Montgomery County Council's Health and Human Services and Planning, Housing and Economic Development subcommittees will hold a joint work session to discuss the use of the Silver Spring Civic Building by Round House Theatre. The meeting is open to the public and will be held in the seventh floor conference room at the Stella B. Werner Council Office Building, 100 Maryland Ave. in Rockville.